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Blue crab shedding plants

W. A. van Engel
Virginia Institute of Marine Science

Dale Ludi

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Cool weather and two northeast storms, in April and May, are believed by Rappahannock River crab fishermen and shedders to have caused a three to four week delay in crabs reaching the early peeler stages of development. Fishermen are still setting crab pound nets (=peeler traps, fykes). Fishermen recall that prior to 12-15 years ago the first "run" of peeler crabs occurred on the full moon of late April or early May. Recently the "runs" have been later, but never as late as this year.

Pound net stands are marked on charts prepared by the District head inspector (VMRC).

1. Franklin Haywood, on Greenvale Creek, near Mollusk, has been fishing for and shedding peelers for more than 30 years. He said he was among the first to shed crabs in tanks on shore. Tanks are painted with copper paint and scrubbed frequently (weekly?). He is setting fewer traps now than formerly. Traps have heads 4-feet high, and are set in 2-3 feet water; leads are usually about 50-feet long. Haywood remembers VIMS forecast of poor 1971 catch; although catch was poor in spring it was good in summer.

He has no shedding problems, except shortage of crabs, absence of "seagrass" and "usual" mortality in hot weather later in the year. He believes herbicides damage eelgrass, and the present absence of eelgrass is due to the herbicides in run off from land.

Haywood agrees that crabs leaving a creek and entering a larger stream would move to the right, and for that reason traps to the right of a mouth should catch more peelers. However, when stream flow is fast, crabs are "swept" away from the mouth and may be carried far offshore before getting back to the shore zone. In this instance the traps farther to the right catch more crabs. Haywood has only a couple of dozen peelers in his tanks.

2. E. J. Conrad and Sons Seafood Company has its shedding house downstream from Haywood's dock. The Conrads' set up tanks with concrete floors, block sides and overhead sprays, about 15 years ago. They now use an additional injection system bringing water to the bottom of the tank. Their drainage plan is unique, drawing water off the bottom, through a horizontal pipe on one side. The building in which the tanks are located has open sides covered with heavy metal fencing, to keep out the raccoons.

The Conrads' deal in oysters too, rent boats, and sell crabs for bait. Milton Conrad is the contact man; his brother and father also work with crabs. The Conrads were setting crab traps the day we visited them. They have a few peelers in the tanks. Crabs are caught in the Corrotoman and Rappahannock rivers.

According to Milton Conrad, records of crabs they buy are given to the VMRC inspectors. Is their own catch reported?

3. Elliott Hutchings, Beach Creek Crab Company, near Ottoman, is reputed to catch more peelers and sell more soft crabs than anyone else in the Northern Neck. Hutchings was setting traps the day we visited him. His plant is under roof, with open sides

covered with wire to keep out raccoons. He has no peelers in tanks.

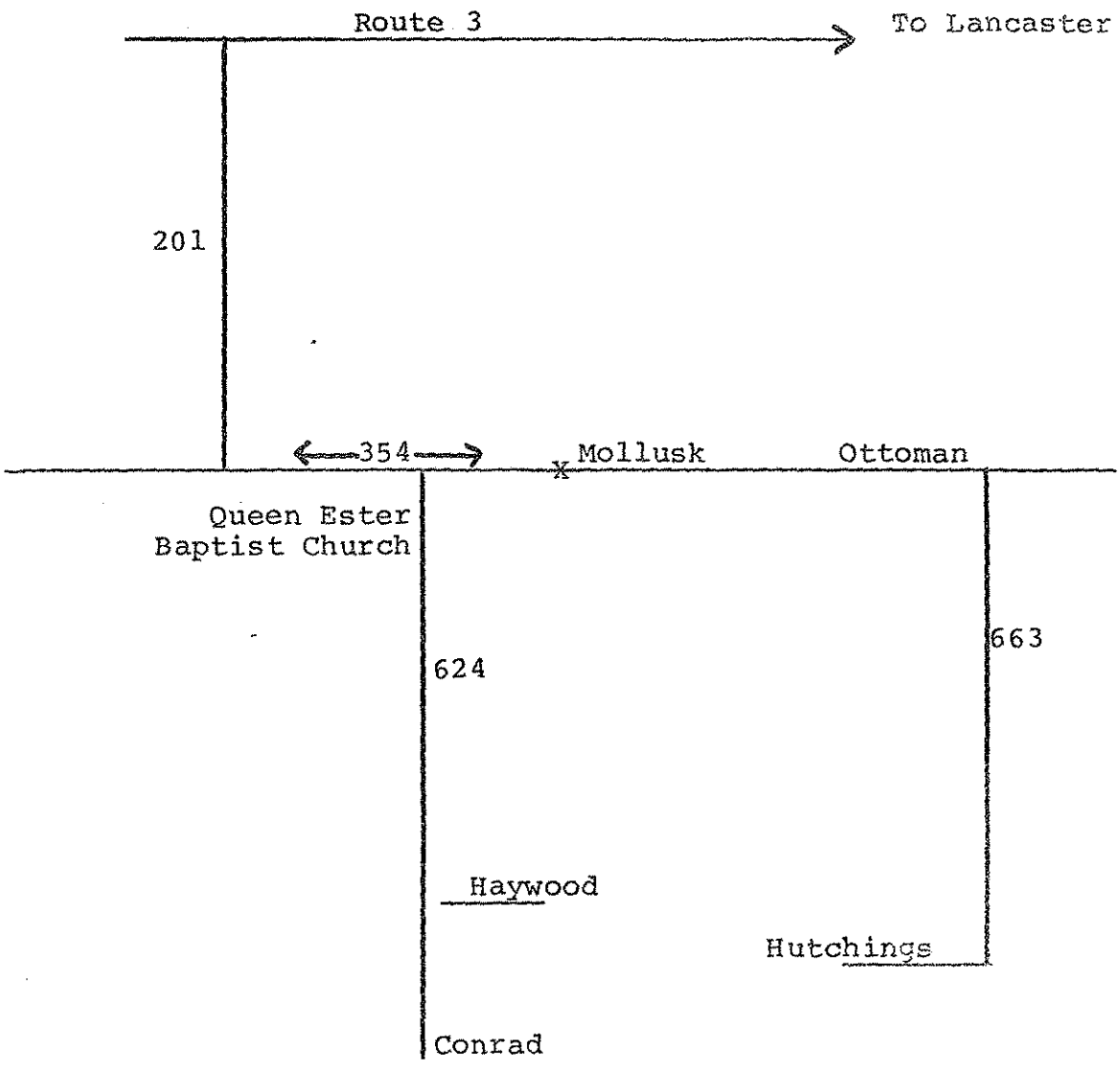
Hutchings is interested in learning of regulations concerning riparian rights, leased ground and crab pound net stands. He said licenses must be taken out by the end of March each year.

Man who worked with Hutchings said that he recognizes three "clicks" in breaking crab claws: when the claw is broken to the first or second "click" the crab can shed successfully, but when the third "click" occurs the crab bleeds at the break and either loses the claw or hangs up in the shed. All crabs handled have claws broken before they are put in the tanks. Once he had no time to break claws on red signs and the crabs shed without injuries or cannibalism. If green peelers claws are not broken, the crabs pile up in the corners.

Crabs are caught on the south shore and north shore of the Rappahannock River.

4. E. William Lundin operates a shedding plant on the Piankatank River, just downriver from the bridge. He uses floats in the early summer and tanks on shore later. The tank system was built one or two years ago (?) by Lundin's son William David Lundin after consulting with Dr. Paul Haefner at VIMS.

5. Dave Gibbons and Ed Lumpkin, co-owners of Gloucester Point Sporting Goods, Inc., operate a crab shedding facility on Sarah's Creek. They do not break the claws on peelers, and are very selective of crabs they hold for shedding. They estimated they had 98% shedding success in 1977.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Mollusk
Ottoman
Queen Ester
Baptist Church
624
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Haywood
Hutchings
Conrad